

For weeks, State and local leaders put normal American life totally on ice and asked citizens to prioritize fighting the virus. For weeks, the mainstream media heaped scorn on any small citizen protest, outdoor gathering, or even the suggestion that other important values might require a reappraisal of certain restrictions.

Well, the American people did their part. They made necessary sacrifices that clearly helped the country, and they are ready to continue doing their part as our reopening carefully proceeds. But now, many Americans feel they have just seen those fastidious regulations and that puritanical zeal disappear in an instant because a new cause has emerged that powerful people agree with.

A month ago, small protest demonstrations were widely condemned as reckless and selfish. Now, massive rallies that fill entire cities are not just praised but, in fact, are called especially brave because of the exact same health risk that brought condemnation when the cause was different.

People just spent the spring watching their small businesses dissolve or canceling weddings or missing religious observances for the longest spells in their lives or missing the last days of a loved one's life and then missing the funeral. Never were the American people told about any exemption for things they felt strongly about.

I have no criticism for the millions of Americans who peacefully demonstrated in recent days. Their cause is beyond righteous. It is the inconsistency from leaders that has been baffling. The same Governor of Michigan who argued that letting people carefully shop for vegetable seeds—vegetable seeds—would be too dangerous during the pandemic, now poses for photographs with groups of protesters. Here in the District of Columbia, the mayor celebrates massive street protests. She actually joins them herself. But on her command, churches and houses of worship remain shut. I believe even the largest church buildings in the District are still subject to the 10-person limit for things the mayor deems inessential.

The rights of free speech, free assembly, and the free exercise of religion are all First Amendment rights. They have the same constitutional pedigree. Apparently, while protests are now permissible, prayer is still too dangerous. Politicians are now picking and choosing within the First Amendment itself.

Last week, one county in California's Bay area seriously attempted to issue guidance that allowed protests of 100 people but still—still capped all other social gatherings at 12 people and banned outdoor religious gatherings altogether—banned outdoor religious gatherings altogether. Figure that one out.

These governments are acting like the coronavirus discriminates based on the content of people's speech, but, alas, it is only the leaders themselves

who are doing that. It is now impossible to avoid the conclusion that local and State leaders are using their power to encourage constitutionally protected conduct which they personally appreciate while continuing to ban constitutionally protected conduct which they personally feel is less important.

In New York City, Mayor de Blasio makes no effort to hide this subjectivity. At one point, he recounted our Nation's history with racism, compared that to "a devout religious person who wants to go back to religious services" and concluded, "Sorry, that is not the same question."

Well, the American people's constitutional liberties do not turn—do not turn on a mayor's intuition. Politicians do not get to play red light, green light within the First Amendment. The Bill of Rights is not some a-la-carte menu that leaders may sample as they please. It is hard to see any rational set of rules by which mass protests should continue to be applauded, but small, careful religious services should continue to be banned.

These prominent Democrats are free to let social protests outrank religion in their own consciences if they choose, but they do not get to impose their ranking on everyone else. This is precisely the point of freedom of conscience. That is precisely the point of the First Amendment.

Weeks ago, citizens sued the mayor of Louisville, KY, when he tried to ban drive-in Easter services while imposing no restrictions on the parking lots of secular businesses. A brilliant district judge had to remind him and the whole country that in America, faith can never be shoved into second class. It seems at least a few local leaders still need to learn that lesson. I hope they learn it soon.

The American people's response to the coronavirus was courageous and patriotic.

On the advice of experts, our Nation sacrificed a great deal to protect our medical system. Politicians must not repay that sacrifice with constitutionally dubious double standards.

GREAT AMERICAN OUTDOORS ACT

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, on an entirely different matter, yesterday our colleagues voted overwhelmingly to advance the Great American Outdoors Act. Thanks to the guiding leadership of colleagues like Senators DAINES and GARDNER, we have a rare opportunity to take a huge step forward with some of our Nation's most cherished treasures.

Every year, America's national parks, forests, wildlife refuges, battlefields, and public lands draw hundreds of millions of visits from across the country and around the world—hunters and anglers, backpackers and climbers, bird watchers and road trippers, school groups and scientists. Across hundreds of millions of acres, there is room for recreation and conservation alike.

Where our Nation makes its natural wonders possible, local communities thrive. According to the National Park Service, park visitors contribute to more than \$40 billion in economic output in adjacent towns. From local hotels and restaurants to the outdoor recreation industry itself, they supported nearly 330,000 jobs.

So it would be difficult to overstate the importance of our public lands in the lives of the American people. When the Senate passes legislation to secure permanent funding for keeping them safe and accessible, we will be ushering in a bright future for American recreation and conservation.

At the same time—and just as importantly—we will be addressing the areas where decades of funding levels for routine maintenance have not kept pace, leaving some of our parks and public lands inaccessible and potentially unsafe.

This is where the rubber meets the road. This is where all of our love for the great American outdoors needs to be backed up with some sober accounting.

In Senator GARDNER's backyard, in the U.S. Forest Service's Rocky Mountain region, last year's totals put the costs of backlog maintenance projects at nearly half a billion dollars. From upkeep of roads, bridges, and dams to updates of wastewater and drinking water systems, we are talking about projects with real consequences for recreation, conservation, and local economies.

In Kentucky, we know all too well what happens when urgent maintenance is neglected. At Mammoth Cave National Park, for example, untreated sewer leaks in past years have restricted access to portions of the largest cave system in the world and even threatened some of its native species.

Today, more than \$90 million in maintenance is still outstanding at that particular park. We are still waiting on funding to rehabilitate cave trails that haven't seen major investment since the 1930s.

At the Forest Service's London district office, Kentucky rangers are still waiting for funding for critical security and accessibility updates.

Like any prized asset, public lands need regular maintenance. We shouldn't let key infrastructure languish for decades and then fight uphill to make up for lost time.

This is a familiar problem that is felt in different ways in every corner of our Nation, so the solution will need to be just as sweeping. Fortunately, as last night's lopsided vote demonstrates, our colleagues have assembled a deeply bipartisan set of solutions that our country deserves.

I am proud the work led by our colleagues from Montana and Colorado have received the endorsement of hundreds of national and local advocates for American recreation and conservation. I urge all Senators to join the experts and support the bill.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

TAXPAYER FIRST ACT OF 2019—
MOTION TO PROCEED—Resumed

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of the motion to proceed to H.R. 1957, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

Motion to proceed to Calendar No. 75, H.R. 1957, a bill to amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to modernize and improve the Internal Revenue Service, and for other purposes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority whip.

POLICE DEPARTMENTS

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, as I begin this morning, I would like to just briefly comment on the outlandish idea of dismantling police departments that has seen substantial coverage in recent days. While there are exceptions, the vast majority of our Nation's police officers are men and women of character who care deeply about protecting everyone in their communities, and they provide an essential service—a service that we cannot do without.

The idea that any city can exist without a police force is so absurd that it is difficult to believe anyone is seriously discussing it. We absolutely need to look at policies at the State, local, and Federal levels to ensure that we are holding police officers to the highest standards, and I hope we will be having serious bipartisan discussions on these issues in the coming weeks.

I know at least one Senate Republican has already introduced legislation to require law enforcement agencies to report the use of lethal force. But bipartisan discussions will not be forwarded by extreme and irresponsible proposals like abolishing the police departments that help protect our communities. I hope that such proposals will not gain any traction here in the U.S. Senate.

BUSINESS BEFORE THE SENATE

Madam President, we are very busy—hard at work—here in the Senate. Our main business on the floor this week will be the Great American Outdoors Act, legislation crafted by Senators DAINES and GARDNER and others, that will help address the significant maintenance backlog in our national parks, among other things.

Out of the limelight, Senators will also be discussing how best to respond

at the Federal level to the tragedy of George Floyd's killing.

Responding to the coronavirus continues to be at the top of our agenda. Right now, we are focused on monitoring the implementation of the \$2.4 trillion that Congress has provided so that we can identify what more we need to do to fight this virus.

Our committees play a leading role in this, and they have kept up a steady stream of hearings examining implementation and identifying next steps.

This week, we have no fewer than eight—eight—committee hearings on various aspects of the COVID crisis, including unemployment insurance, a Senate Finance Committee hearing later today that I will be participating in, reopening schools, and the Federal Government's procurement and distribution strategies.

The Democratic leader has spent a lot of time on the floor lately, complaining about what is happening in the Senate. He is, apparently, not happy that we are in session, and he claims we are not doing anything on the coronavirus.

Well, on the first point, I would just like to say that the majority leader brought the Senate back into session because we have responsibilities that we need to fulfill. One of the issues that we have to respond to, as a matter of our constitutional obligation, is the issue of dealing with nominations, both to judicial and executive branches of our government. We continue to have to do that.

There are important vacancies that we need to fill, some important national security vacancies, judicial vacancies. Last week, we confirmed the inspector general for the pandemic, somebody who was confirmed by a 75-to-15 vote.

Now, it is possible that we could do those and not be here. The Democratic leader has said on various occasions he doesn't know why we are here doing these types of nominations. Well, the reason we are here doing these types of nominations is that they insist on it.

Even in cases where the nominee has broad bipartisan support—in some cases, overwhelming support—we continue to have to stay here and go through the procedural roadblocks that Democrats throw up to getting these nominees across the finish line.

In fact, if you look at the historical context of nominations, we are living in unprecedented times. The Democrats have filibustered now—totaled—314 nominees that President Trump has put forward. For all of the previous Presidents combined—all of the previous Presidents combined in our Nation's history—only on 244 occasions did cloture have to be invoked to shut down a filibuster on nominees.

Think about that. In the first 3½ years of President Trump's term, we now have had 314 nominees—judicial or executive—filibustered. In the rest of the history of the U.S. Senate, even if you go back and say that the advent of

the filibuster is only in the last half century or so. Think about that: 244 times, throughout all of the Presidencies combined—combined—in our history, but this President has seen his nominees filibustered 314 times.

So if the Democratic leader wants to know why we are here doing nominees, that is why. We have to. It is our job. It is our constitutional responsibility. If the minority continues to make it as difficult as they have and continues to filibuster and force the leader to file cloture on all these nominees, we have to be here to vote. That is our job, and that is why we are here.

Of course, there is also the work, as I said, of responding to the coronavirus. There is also work we have to do that doesn't stop just because there is a pandemic.

If you look at the Paycheck Protection Program, when it ran out of money, it took way too long to convince Democrats to do something as simple as appropriate more funding for pandemic-stricken small businesses.

Funding our government, protecting our Nation, making sure these important positions in the government, as I mentioned, are filled—we just can't skip those things because of the coronavirus, and they have made it increasingly difficult—virtually impossible—for us to do any of this by unanimous consent while the Senate was out of session.

As for the Democratic leader's charge that the Senate hasn't been doing anything on coronavirus, as I pointed out, that is just a simply ridiculous charge to make. Coronavirus has been at the forefront of the Senate activity since we returned in May.

Our committees have held a constant stream of hearings examining implementation of the coronavirus assistance that we have already passed and looking forward to what will be needed in the future.

As I mentioned, last week, we confirmed the nomination of Brian D. Miller to be Special Inspector General for Pandemic Recovery at the Treasury Department, a key position with responsibility for ensuring the coronavirus funding is spent properly.

We also passed last week legislation to update the Paycheck Protection Program to give additional flexibility to small businesses. Clearly—clearly—the Senate has been making coronavirus a priority.

I would argue that much of what we have already done is having the desired result. The jobs numbers that came out last week are encouraging. Obviously, we have a lot of work to do. We have to keep it in perspective. It is no time to be spiking the football. But those job numbers were encouraging.

I think one of the reasons we had those strong numbers is because we have a very resilient economy, No. 1, and, No. 2, because of policies we have put in place—tax and regulatory policies that have encouraged businesses to invest, consumers to spend.